

## **Talking to Patients About Weight Issues**

Primary care providers are in an ideal position to offer weight guidance to patients who are overweight or obese and to reinforce healthy weight. The key is starting that conversation.

NIH's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) offers the following suggestions about what patients want from their healthcare professional regarding weight:

- **Talk.** Many patients want to talk about weight with health care professionals who offer respect and empathy for their struggles with weight control. However, before starting a conversation about weight control with your patients, give them a few minutes to discuss other issues that may be affecting their physical or emotional well-being.
- **Non-offensive terms.** Patients prefer the terms “weight” or “excess weight,” and dislike the terms “obesity,” “fatness,” and “excess fat.”
- **Advice they can use.** Many patients want help setting realistic goals. They may want to know what to eat and what and how much physical activity is appropriate. For example, some patients will want to know how to become more physically active without causing injury or aggravating problems such as joint pain. Others will want advice on choosing appropriate weight-loss products and services.

NIDDK continues with these tips for talking about weight:

1. **Address your patient's chief complaint first, independent of weight.** You can assume your patient already knows he or she is overweight. Patients do not want health care professionals to place blame or attribute all of their health problems to weight.
2. **Open the discussion.** Open the conversation by finding out if your patient is willing to talk about weight, or expressing your concerns about how his or her weight affects health. Then, you might ask your patient to describe his or her weight. Here are some sample discussion openers:

*“Mr. Lopez, could we talk about your weight? What are your thoughts about your weight right now?”*

*“Mrs. Brown, I’m concerned about your weight because I think it is causing health problems for you. What do you think about your weight?”*

Be sensitive to cultural differences that your patients may bring to the discussion regarding weight, food preferences, and related issues. Patients may be more open when they feel respected.

3. **Decide if your patient is ready to control weight.** Ask more questions to find out how ready a patient is to control weight. Some sample questions are below.

*“What are your goals concerning your weight?”*

*“What changes are you willing to make to your eating and physical activity habits right now?”*

*“What kind of help would you like from me regarding your weight?”*

A patient who is not yet ready to attempt weight control may still benefit from a discussion about healthy eating and regular physical activity. A talk focusing on the ways weight may affect your patient’s health may also be appropriate. You can reassess the patient’s readiness to control weight at the next office visit. A patient who is ready to control weight will benefit from setting a weight-loss goal, receiving advice about healthy eating and regular physical activity, and follow-up.

4. **Set a weight goal.** A 5- to 10-percent reduction in body weight over 6 months is a reasonable weight-loss goal. One half to 2 pounds per week is a safe rate of weight loss. A goal of maintaining current weight and preventing weight gain may be appropriate for some patients. Setting too high a weight loss goal sets the patient up for failure. Focus on healthy eating and physical activity habits.

5. **Prescribe healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.** Give your patient concrete actions to take to meet his or her weight goal over the next 6 months. Write a prescription for healthier eating and increased physical activity on a prescription pad. You could also direct your patients to print or online information about weight, healthy eating, and physical activity such as those at [www.healthysd.gov](http://www.healthysd.gov)

Some patients may benefit from a weight-loss medication or obesity surgery. NIDDK’s fact sheets “Prescription Medications for the Treatment of Obesity” (<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/prescription.htm>) and “Gastrointestinal Surgery for Severe Obesity” (<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/gastric.htm>) offer information about these two treatments.

Another option is to refer to others who can provide more indepth counseling and treatment. See Referral Options.

6. **Follow up.** When you see your patient again, note progress made on behavior changes, such as walking at least 5 days a week. If your patient has made healthy behavior changes, offer praise to boost self-esteem and keep him or her motivated. Likewise, discuss setbacks to help your patient overcome challenges and be more successful.

Set a new weight goal with your patient. This may be for weight loss or prevention of weight gain. Discuss eating and physical activity habits to change or maintain to meet the new weight goal.

Evidence suggests that over 80 percent of persons who lose weight will gradually regain it. Patients who continue on weight maintenance programs have a greater chance of keeping weight off. Maintenance consists of continued contact with the health care practitioner for continued education, support, and medical monitoring.

### Children and Adolescents

Parents or other caregivers of children and adolescents may not recognize that their child weighs more than they should but an open discussion (with or without the child present) may help start the process. All ages can benefit from healthy eating and physical activity habits. As with adults, open the conversation by finding out if the parent is willing to talk about their child's weight or express your concerns about how his or her weight affects current or future health. Here are some sample discussion openers:

*"Mrs. White, could we talk about your child's weight? What are your thoughts about his weight right now?"*

*"Mr. Jones, I'm concerned about your child's weight because I think it is starting to cause health problems for her. What do you think about your child's weight?"*

Parents may be extra sensitive if they also battle with weight issues. Initiating a conversation about the family's health may also provide an opportunity to help parents prevent the health problems that come with excess weight in their children.